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Review of The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart

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Abstract:

This paper is a review for *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* by Noel Carroll. It was originially presented in Resources for Adults, Fall 2009.

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The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart. **By Noel Carroll. New York: Routledge, 1990. 272 pp. $39.95 ISBN 0-415-90145-6**

Horror is a genre perhaps most familiar through films. The "Nightmare on Elm Street" series, the "Halloween" series, and the more recent "Saw" series scare the living daylights out of viewers, who happily go back for more with every sequel. Before there were films, radio shows, plays, and books gave those interested their horror fix. Why this genre has been around so long, and why it remains popular are questions that Noel Carroll attempts to answer in his book, *The Philosophy of Horror.*

Carroll starts with a brief history of the genre, naming *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (1765) as the first of the horror genre. From this Gothic novel, horror progressed through H.P. Lovecraft, William Blatty (of *Exorcist* fame), and on to Stephen King. Carroll defines the emotion each of these authors sought to instill in readers as "art-horror," a combination of fear of the described menace, and revulsion at its presence. Fear is the expected response to danger, but the revulsion is trickier to place. Carroll states that revulsion is a result of the monster crossing conceptual boundaries (pp. 31-32). For instance, zombies are both living and dead; the Fly is both human and insect, etc. A related example are things most people find repellant to begin with, like spiders, and making them of huge physical size, or collecting lots of them together, which Carroll calls magnification the case of the former, and massification in the case of the latter (pp. 52).

Carroll then breaks down the basic plot structure and its variations of many works of horror, often with plot descriptions of relevant books, and finishes with book with an analysis of why people seek out what common sense says they should try to avoid.

This work is a content analysis of many different types of horror fiction, and by analyzing these different works, attempts to come up with a general theory of horror fiction. Carroll did not survey, interview, or otherwise consult audience members for this book, because he wasn't concerned with what actual audiences thought. Carroll believes, "…that a work of art-horror has built into it, so to speak, a set of instructions about the appropriate way the audience is to respond to it. These instructions are manifested…in the responses of the positive, human characters to the monsters in horror fiction" (31). This does not mean that audiences react exactly as the characters do, because if that were the case, no one would actually read the book—they would build a shelter and load up on weapons to fight off the monsters. Instead, according to Carroll's "thought theory," readers can be moved by the content of their thoughts, in this case thoughts suggested by a work of horror fiction. But having the thought is not the same as *believing* that thought is literally true (p. 88).

Carroll admits in the acknowledgements that he is a lifelong fan of the genre, and hopes this book proves to his parents that all the time he spent on horror as a kid was not wasted after all. He is on the faculty at the City University of New York, and has doctorates in philosophy and film studies (CUNY Graduate Center philosophy department page: http://web.gc.cuny.edu/philosophy/people/carroll.html). He has also written or collaborated on 14 books, many of which deal with the medium of film. Perhaps these qualifications explain why the book is so dense. Carroll spends several pages (pp. 168-178) applying psychoanalysis to horror (to discover why people return to and find pleasure in something that seems painful to

experience) only to dismiss psychoanalysis as useful for certain subgenres or specific works, but not the right basis for a general theory of horror. He refers to the works of the late British anthropologist Mary Douglas, Sigmund Freud, David Hume, and more. His sources are certainly authoritative, but rather intimidating for readers new to the genre. This book's intended audience is most likely film students, probably at the graduate level.

Carroll's quest for a general theory of horror means that he focuses most of the book on the thought processes behind why people think and react to horror as they do. While an important part of any theory, Carroll does not give much attention to the history of the genre beyond the introduction, or do more than mention the embedded, and often blatant, sexism found in horror fiction (pp. 196-197). He also mentions that horror fiction experiences resurgence in difficult times, like the Great Depression and the beginning of the Cold War (pp. 207-208), and that the films of these times speak to social concerns of the time. One example is the sympathetic figure of Frankenstein's creature, a social outcast through no fault of his own. This situation is analogous to the thousands who were unemployed in the 1930s (pp. 208). These are significant issues within the horror genre, and deserve more than a passing mention.

Despite the big name citations, dense passages, and no illustrations, this book is well worth the effort required to read it. Carroll presents a thorough introduction to the horror genre as a whole, and explains in great detail how and why certain themes are common, what makes monsters scary, and breaks down the common plot structure of "complex discovery" into its components: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation. He then reassembles these parts into fourteen different plot structures, and names examples for each. There are also some humorous parenthetical asides that show just how much Carroll loves this topic: "Nor (as I have

learnt the hard way) does one received tax deductions or government support for consuming horror" (pp. 205).

Carroll's is not the only work on the horror genre. Much has been written on this topic. Google Scholar shows that since 2000, more than 17,000 books and articles have been written about horror. Without the date restriction, over 100,000 books and articles are returned in a search for "horror" and "genre." Many of these works relate to horror films, video games, or television, or analyze an aspect of the genre, such as gender and violence. Readers interested in such themes will not find much in this book. *The Philosophy of Horror* provides an excellent overview of the genre found nowhere else. It is a detailed, though general, resource that new horror readers would find helpful, both in finding books to read, and in understanding how and why the genre works.